

Agrippina's last words (rpt.)

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Tacitus' account of Agrippina's death in *Annals* 14 is a dramatic masterpiece. When we see how closely her words echo the last words of two dramatic heroines – Seneca's Jocasta and the Agrippina of a later playwright – we see how this gesture, though it may not be historically 'accurate', adds a subtle but crucial layer of meaning to Tacitus' narrative of her life and death.

'Strike the belly!' One of the great moments of Roman history, as Agrippina, facing down the centurion sent to kill her, takes rhetorical control of her death with four crisp syllables (*uentrem feri*, in Latin). Famous last words have always fascinated, from Nero's histrionic 'what an artist dies in me!' and Vespasian's droll 'oh dear, I seem to be becoming a god', through to King George V's alleged reply to his doctor's advice: 'bugger Bognor'. Short phrases like these are the stuff of legend – but also suspiciously neat, summing up a life in an instant. Did Agrippina really produce those two words just on cue? There's good reason to think that Tacitus is doing something both less and more than reporting the facts of this murder case.

Agrippina's death scene is a dramatic highlight of the *Annals*, an appropriate climax to one of Tacitus' principal subplots, the rise and fall of the most scheming woman of his history, a woman who will stop at nothing to win power for her son, murdering her husband Claudius and even willing to die at Nero's hands ('let him kill me, provided he rule'). Of course, she proves correct, as son rewards mother's crimes with one of his own: matricide. The huge amount of coverage Tacitus gives it – more than half the narrative for the entire year A.D. 59 – is a reflection of her importance, as he sees it, to an understanding of Nero's rule. It also provides some excellent material to keep his readers entertained. But where does this material come from?

A dramatic turn

Nero's principate was only fifty or sixty years in the past when Tacitus was writing in the A.D. 110s, but there was already no shortage of historical accounts, several of which he used as 'sources'. Very rarely, and always at moments of particular importance, he names historians to compare their different versions of events, as he does near the start of book 14. Sadly for us, none of them survives. But when we come to the climax of Agrippina's murder and that stunning one-liner, we will see that Tacitus was using a different kind of source altogether. Not a historian, not even prose: we need to look instead to verse, and the tragedies of Seneca.

The reader of Tacitus' *Annals* knows Seneca as Nero's tutor, adviser, and eventual victim, the star of a death scene of his own. But Tacitus also knew Seneca as a prolific author, whose works included not just reams of philosophy, but also at least seven plays on subjects familiar from Attic tragedy. One of these is *Oedipus*, which retells the story best known to us through Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Seneca's version has many elements in common with his predecessor's, but one striking difference is how he handles Jocasta's death. In *Oedipus the King* she hangs herself off-stage, but Seneca brings her on in the last scene for a final dialogue with her now blinded son, and gory suicide with a sword. Blaming herself for the 'crime' of her marriage to Oedipus, she ends with the cry: 'Aim for this, my right hand, this spacious womb, which bore my husband and my sons'.

Jocasta and Agrippina both demanding to be stabbed in the womb: can this be coincidence? Admittedly Agrippina says 'belly', not 'womb', but that is a fine distinction, especially as the word for 'womb' comes immediately before in the sentence. Coincidence is unlikely if not impossible: Agrippina's death scene appears to be modelled on Jocasta's. In Tacitus' version of events, Seneca doesn't just write Nero's speech justifying the murder (*Annals* 14.11), he also scripts the last words of his mother.

This is a nice touch. First of all, it's the perfect finish to what has been a highly theatrical scene, even by the standards of the *Annals*. After the drama of the collapsing boat, people gather on the shore near

Agrippina's villa: 'a huge crowd streams in', like an audience arriving at the theatre. All they can see, though, is the outside of the villa, like the backdrop of a stage. But we privileged readers can go further, as the narrative closes in on the victim, film-style: first the house, then the bedroom, that ultimate sanctum, then to Agrippina herself, as even her loyal maid abandons her. With writing like this, Tacitus can beat drama at its own game.

The ham emperor

Theatre is more literally in the air, too: it is just here, immediately after Agrippina's death, that Tacitus launches his acerbic attack on the thespian frivolities of Nero, that notorious 'stage emperor', as Pliny the Younger called him. Nero takes to the boards only when his mother is out of the way; but Tacitus himself, in a narrative as theatrical as the emperor it describes, puts even Agrippina's death on stage.

So Seneca the tragedian is a suitable voice to invoke here. But of all his tragic characters, Jocasta is a piquant choice, and not flattering to Agrippina. Who would choose to compare themselves to Oedipus and Jocasta, the incestuous pair *par excellence*? Because it is precisely the incest theme which makes Jocasta such a good fit. Everyone knows the stories about Nero and Agrippina, though like all good rumours they come in varying forms. Suetonius, writing around the same time as Tacitus, pins the blame on Nero, and spares no detail in reporting claims that mother and son used to emerge from their litter with stains on their clothes. Tacitus rejects such stories: he concludes that Nero was innocent (in this one respect), but not for want of trying by Agrippina, who 'would dress herself up, ready for incest, and offer herself to him when he was drunk'. This seems more likely, he concludes in a particularly vicious side-swipe, given her track-record of adultery and incest, not least in marrying her uncle Claudius (so recalling a running theme of book 12).

In that case, Jocasta (unknowingly committing incest) and Agrippina (trying and failing to commit incest) are not a perfect match. But we saw that Jocasta's last speech, as Seneca writes it, insists that the fault lies not with son but with mother. Right or wrong, it fits all too well with

Tacitus' twisted Agrippina, a final confirmation on her own lips that she, if anything more than Nero, is to blame.

Are we entitled to make these sorts of inferences? Imagine if a character in a modern drama said, 'Out, damned spot!'. It would be an unmissable invitation to draw comparisons, to ask questions: how like or unlike Lady Macbeth is this character at this moment? Certainly, we know that Romans of Tacitus' time were used to spotting contemporary references in stage tragedies: Tacitus' *Dialogue on orators* features a modern poet whose *Thyestes* is set to offend 'the people in power', and it wasn't long since Domitian had executed a playwright for covertly criticizing him in a play about Paris of Troy (a cheeky choice: Domitian's wife was rumoured to be having an affair with an actor called Paris).

Reprising roles

So when Tacitus makes Agrippina play Jocasta, he's expecting us to notice. But the plot thickens. Nero's murder of Octavia and marriage to Poppaea had already proved an appealing dramatic theme before Tacitus, as it would after (for instance, in Monteverdi's stunning opera *The Coronation of Poppaea*). Not long after Nero's death, someone known to us only as 'anon.' wrote a play called *Octavia* in the style of Seneca (now, of course, dead too), which features Seneca in the role of sage but helpless minister and Nero as cruel despot and murderer. Like *Annals* 14, the play concludes with the climactic killing of Octavia; the first choral ode describes Agrippina's murder. The Chorus recounts the familiar story: the failed shipwreck, the arrival of the assassin, and finally her last words: 'As she dies, poor woman, she asks the agent of her murder to bury his dire sword in her womb. "This, this is what the blade must strike," she says, "which bore such a monster!"'.

Once again we meet the 'womb motif', no doubt borrowed, like most of the *Octavia*, from Seneca's own tragedies, and reapplied to Neronian history. Unless you're willing to believe – and it seems unlikely – that Agrippina herself had quoted Seneca on her deathbed, and that her words had been faithfully noted down, the evidence is clear: when Tacitus dramatizes Agrippina's death *à la* Jocasta, he's not just imitating Seneca, he's imitating Seneca's imitator.

Have we exposed him as a plagiarist? Not in ancient terms. Reworking earlier literature is absolutely standard in the Roman world, whether it's Virgil using Homer for his *Aeneid* or Horace Romanizing the world of Greek lyric in his *Odes*. And, as we see in Tacitus here, it's not just a poet's trick. Tacitus has taken

a motif which had already worked its way into the tradition on Agrippina's death, and sharpened it into a killer line. Two short words to make us reflect on matricide (the fruit of the womb destroys the womb) and incest – to capture, in a nutshell, The Problem With Agrippina.

Did Agrippina ever say 'strike the belly'? Almost certainly not: we should never mistake the *Annals* for 'history', pure and simple. A good playwright knows that individual details, so-called 'facts', are less important than the deeper truths that a play can tell – and Tacitus is as good a dramatist as any.

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